

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 223

CS 003 381

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TITLE Poetry as Motivation for Reading.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (22nd, Miami Beach, Florida, May 2-6, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); *Creative Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; *Student Motivation; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

An interest in poetry provides motivation for children to read; in order to inspire such an interest, teachers must avoid four commonly used approaches to poetry: teaching poetry as an isolated subject, as if it had a language all its own; teaching poetry for purposes of analysis; selecting inappropriate poetry for children and presenting it in inappropriate ways; and teaching poetry for purposes of testing. Positive approaches to poetry involve teaching poetry as a natural form of language, avoiding the forced analysis of poetry, selecting poetry which is meaningful for pupils, and avoiding testing pupils on poetry they have read. Additionally, an invaluable way to encourage the enjoyment of poetry is to teach pupils to write their own poems. Collaborative poems may be written initially, as a means of overcoming pupil resistance to writing poetry; such poems may be typed and placed in a looseleaf notebook for pupils to read. Other types of poetry writing which appeal to pupils include the writing of blank verse, cinquains, haiku, couplets, and limericks. The poetry the children write can then become excellent reading material. (GW)

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Poetry as Motivation for Reading

How many of you grew up hating poetry? If you are an individual who answers this question in the affirmative, "welcome to the club." There are basically four reasons why children learn to dislike poetry and all four are frequently due to the teacher. That is, teachers do four things which generally kill interest in poetry. These are:

Teachers teach poetry as a language all its own. Teachers talk about prose, fiction, non-fiction, biography, and then, "way out there," all by itself is "poetry."--way out in limbo (usually stated in hushed tones). This, of course, gives poetry all of the qualities of being something of a third sex. And then we wonder why pupils--especially boys--do not like it.

Teachers teach poetry for purposes of analysis. They continually ask pupils "what does that mean?" "What mental image do you gain from that poem?" Pupils are not only suppose to gain a mental image from each and every poem, but the pupils, in many cases, are suppose to grasp the same mental image as the teacher. The result is a form of dissection. There

lie all of the analyzed pieces, bleeding on the floor. Perhaps rather than analysis or dissection, vivisection is a more appropriate term. When we have finished cutting apart an entity while it is still alive, what is left to appreciate?

Teachers make inappropriate selection of poetry for children and present it in inappropriate ways. Children who have experienced all of Hiawatha, The Children's Hour, or Barefoot Boy with Cheeks of Tan, have possibly developed a negative attitude toward poetry. All three of these poems serve as examples of poetry that is too advanced for elementary age children. The last two, in particular, are examples of adults reminiscing about childhood. Now, what elementary age child has enough childhood behind him for reminiscence?

In addition, teachers frequently present these inappropriately selected poems in an inappropriate manner. How frequently have you had or heard teachers present a poem in very hushed tones--which of course does little for the poem. On the other hand, there are the teachers who recite poems in a sing-song manner killing all natural rhyme and rhythm. A third possibility is the teacher who omits poetry from the curriculum.

Fourth is the situation in which the teacher teaches poetry for purposes of testing. That is, the pupils are always being held responsible for the poetry they supposedly have read. Furthermore, forced memorization is little more than one of the most insidious forms of testing. The only pupils who enjoyed this assignment were those who received a grade

of "A". But then, we always like those things we do successfully.

There are recommendations for counteracting these negative approaches to teaching poetry.

1. Teach poetry as a natural form of language.
2. Do not ask pupils to analyze poetry. If they want to discuss a poem, encourage it. Forced analysis establishes a relationship similar to that between dentists and an abscessed tooth--painful.
3. Select poetry that speaks to pupils in their own language and tells it like it is from the pupil's point of view.
4. Poetry should not be tested. It should just be. If you present poetry that a child likes he will probably remember or memorize it because he wants to--not because he has to.

However, if poetry is to become a true motivation for reading, pupils need to become not only consumers but also the producers of poetry. By creating their own poems, children will much more likely appreciate the poems that others have created.

Of course most teachers are aware that the quickest way to kill interest in poetry is to ask pupils to write a poem. Reactions today are similar to reactions of twenty or thirty years ago. They frequently included:

"Pomes, do we 'gotta'? The only thing worse than pomes are story problems."

"Does it 'gotta' rhyme?"

"Do we have to have stanzas?" "What's a stanza?"

"What rhymes with orange?"

To avoid these responses, you sneak up on the pupils. Remember, the effective teacher is frequently the sneaky teacher. This kind of teacher is the one who makes things happen so the pupils think it is their idea.

One approach, borrowing from Kenneth Koch (1970), is the collaboration. It is simple and highly effective because you do not ask anyone to write a poem, only a sentence. Start with an experience the class has in common. If nothing else, start with the weather. There are three steps.

"Think about the weather. Let's make a wish about it."

"Since we are making a wish about the weather, start your sentence with the two word, 'I wish.'"

"Since wishing is always more fun in technicolor, use a color word somewhere in the sentence."

These sentences can be written on index cards or any other suitable material. Pupils do not sign their names. The cards are collected and shuffled in view of the pupils. The teacher then states we have written a poem, a collaboration. The title of it is, "Reflections on the Weather." It goes like this. (Read one card at a time.) Success is guaranteed.

Reflections on the Weather

I wish every day dawned cool and lovely with a blue sky and
singing birds.

I wish that on a beautiful day I could float with the white
clouds above the world

I wish for a warm, sunny summer and to lie in green grass.

I wish the weather would continue to lend color to our
way of thinking.

I wish the color of the weather would not blacken the
day.

I wish the beauty of the clear blue sky could be stored
for future use.

I wish I could spend the first day of summer home in my
white bed.

-lines selected from
a class collaboration

After a few collaborations have been written by the class, it is not surprising to find small groups of children creating their own. All collaborations are typed and "bound" in a looseleaf notebook. This book of "Our Collaboration" will probably become one of the most read books in any classroom. Even children who encounter difficulty reading the basal reader will read this book with little difficulty. Interest and internal motiva-

tion based on, "This book is ours--we wrote it," will make the difference.

Other forms of poetry which can be used to achieve the same purpose include:

Blank verse. This can easily be accomplished by providing an unfinished stem to which each child may respond. For example, although "happiness is..." is somewhat overworked, "rain is," may be very effective. Once, using this stem with a group of first grade pupils, one child responded with, "...a day for hiding behind furniture." Another called it, "...the washer of leaves."

If young children have not yet mastered the mechanics of handwriting, this entire activity may be accomplished verbally. The teacher initially writes the responses on the chalkboard. The page for the book plus a copy for each child may not appear until the following day.

Have you tried the Cinquain? This is a highly structured and yet extremely flexible and creative form of poetry. The structure is simple:

first line, one word, the name of something or someone.

second line, two words that describe.

third line, three words that show action

forth line, four words that state a feeling or emotion.

fifth line, one word, a synonym for the first word.

With a little practice and encouragement the class may also develop their own book of Cinquains. As an example:

Pigs

Curly tail

It is sloppy

And it likes mud

Pets.

-Charlotte Hershfield
Grade 2

Haiku is also successful. This is the three line, seventeen syllables, non-rhyming, Japanese poetry. The verse contains five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five syllables in the third line. Pupils who can recognize and identify syllables usually have success with Haiku.

Couplets and Triplets are also suggested. Couplets are two lines that rhyme. Triplets are three lines that rhyme. Once pupils can write Couplets and Triplets, they are ready to write Limericks. The Limerick is the combination of a Couplet and a Triplet. In the Limerick lines 1,2, and 5 are the triplet. Lines 3 and 4 are the couplet.

Pupils at any level, with encouragement from the teacher, can become successful producers of poetry. The poetry the children write can become excellent reading material. In this sense then, poetry can truly become motivation for reading. The reading of the pupils' own poetry and poetry written by others. The first step is to have the pupils write and read

poetry. Later there will be time to worry about the quality of the poetry the pupils write.

Remember:

Poetry should be
as life itself, suspended
twixt the real and dreams.

-John Davis

Reference: Koch, Kenneth. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, Vintage Books, 1970.